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Labovitz School of Business & Economics, University of Minnesota Duluth, 11 E. Superior Street, Suite 210, Duluth, MN 55802

The Impact of Power on Reliance on Feelings Versus Reasons in Decision Making

Hannah H. Chang, Singapore Management University, Singapore

Jiewen Hong, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, China

Yunhui Huang, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, China

We examine the impact of power on consumer decision making. Results from four experiments provide converging evidence that people in high- (low-) power states are more likely to rely on affective feelings (cognitive reasoning) in making judgments and decisions.

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Yunhui Huang, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, China

Jiewen Hong, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, China

Hannah H. Chang, Singapore Management University, Singapore

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Power refers to the asymmetric control over other individuals or over valued resources in social relations (Magee and Galinsky 2008). Recent research suggests that despite being an inherently social construct, power can translate directly into a psychological state that influences individuals' attitudes and behaviors. For example, it has been found that possessing power liberates people to express their true attitudes and pursue their personal goals (e.g., Anderson and Berdahl 2002; Galinsky, Gruenfeld, and Magee 2003; Guinote 2007) and decreases attention paid to others (Goodwin et al. 2000; Lammers et al. 2013; van Kleef et al. 2008). Interestingly however, relatively less research has investigated the impact of power on individuals' decision making process. In this research we examine how power affects consumers' relative reliance on feelings versus reasons in making decisions. We propose that individuals who feel powerful (vs. powerless) would exhibit a greater relative reliance on feelings versus reasons in decision making.

Given the distinct attention focus associated with having or lacking power (Anderson and Berdahl 2002), we argue that the differential attention focus has implications for how consumers in different power states rely on feelings versus reasons in making judgments and decisions. Possessing power indicates that one is less dependent on others for resources, allowing one to pursue personal interests and goals desired by the self. As a result, high-power individuals tend to have a heightened focus on themselves (e.g., Anderson and Berdahl 2002; Galinsky et al. 2008; Guinote 2010). In contrast, lacking power indicates that one is dependent on others for valuable resources, making one more likely to attend to others' goals in order to achieve their own. As a result, low-power individuals tend to pay increased attention to others (e.g., Anderson and Berdahl 2002; Galinsky et al. 2006; Keltner et al. 1998). Past research has further suggested that feelings are more likely to be relied upon during decision making when individuals focus on themselves, because feelings inform decisions made for the self (vs. others; Hsee and Weber 1997; Raghunathan and Pham 1999) and are more salient under heightened self-focus (Scheier and Carver 1977). In contrast, logical reasoning is more likely to be relied upon in decision making when individuals focus on others, because taking others' perspectives involves complex cognitive reasoning (Epley and Caruso 2009). Taken together, we hypothesize that consumers in high-power states, who tend to exert greater self-focus, would rely more on feelings versus reasons in decision making compared to those in low-power states, who tend to exert less self-focus and more perspective taking. We test this prediction in four studies and find convergent support for our prediction.

To provide initial evidence for our hypothesis that consumers in states of high power are more likely to rely on feelings versus reasons than consumers in states of low power, experiment 1 manipulated power using episodic recall (see Galinsky, Gruenfeld and Magee 2003) prior to having participants indicate their relative preference between an affectively superior and a cognitively superior laptop. Consistent with our prediction, participants in the high-power condition exhibited a stronger preference for the affectively superior laptop ($M = 4.53$) than those in the low-power condition ($M = 3.56$; $F(1, 64) = 4.17, p < .05$).

Experiment 2 replicated the result of experiment 1 using a word fragment completion task to manipulate power (see Magee et al.

2007). Furthermore, experiment 2 directly measured participants' relative reliance on feelings versus reasons in making the choice. Mediation analysis confirmed that the observed effect of power on the choice between an affectively superior and a cognitively superior option was driven by participants' differential reliance on feelings versus reasons during decisions.

Experiment 3 used a different method for testing the hypothesized effect. Hsee and Rottenstreich (2004) suggest that valuation judgments based on affect is less sensitive to the "scope" of the evaluative stimulus than those based on cognition. If high- (vs. low-) power states indeed promote a greater relative reliance on feelings, consumers who feel powerful should exhibit scope insensitivity whereas consumers who feel powerless should not. Participants were shown a one-day travel package containing either one or four tourist spots following power manipulation, and asked for their willingness-to-pay (WTP) for the package. Results showed that, in line with our prediction, the interaction between power and scope was significant ($F(1, 139) = 5.30, p < .05$). For participants in the low-power condition, their WTP was higher for the four-spot package than for the one-spot package ($M_{4\text{-spot}} = \$160.61$ vs. $M_{1\text{-spot}} = \$87.62$; $F(1, 139) = 4.26, p < .05$). However, for those in the high-power condition, their WTP did not vary with the number of the spots ($M_{4\text{-spot}} = 122.24$ vs. $M_{1\text{-spot}} = 106.80$; $F(1, 139) < 1, p = .36$).

Experiment 4 examined a downstream consequence of the hypothesized effect using a fit paradigm (Higgins 2005). To demonstrate that a fit between a consumer's power state and the decision strategy induced by this particular power state leads to increased valuation of the selected option, following power manipulation, participants were explicitly instructed to rely on either feelings or reasons in making their decisions. Consistent with our prediction, the analysis yielded a significant interaction effect ($F(1, 137) = 4.50, p < .05$) such that participants in the high- (low-) power condition were willing to pay more for the chosen option when they made their decisions following a feeling-based (reason-based) strategy.

Our research contributes to the literature on consequences of power. While an extensive body of research on power investigates its consequences in a social context, this research is one of an emerging stream of studies that examine how power might have an influence on the intra-person decision-making processes. Our research also offers practical suggestions for designing advertisements. Campaigns with largely emotional appeals might be more effective for a high-power target audience (e.g., high-level managers); in contrast, campaigns promoting mainly functional attributes of the product should better target an audience in states of low power (e.g., lower-level employees).

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